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## Access to Higher Education of Ethnic Minorities in China

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### Abstract

Expanding the access to higher education (HE) has become a hot and controversial policy globally. And the right to higher education, which is beyond only enlarge the access, draws drastic attentions currently (Bruke, 2012). China also has issued a series of policies to widen the participation of HE and to insure people's right to enter HE. The purpose of this study is to provide a clear picture of Chinese national minorities' higher education and the government's policies towards these minorities that have been implemented.

**Key words:** Higher education; Ethnic minorities; Equality

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### INTRODUCTION

"By law, a citizen has a right to receive higher education. Citizens legally have an equal opportunity to receive higher education regardless of their ethnicity, race, gender, profession, socioeconomic status, and religious belief, etc." (Teng & Ma, 2009, p.90). Among these aspects of the right, the race and ethnicity issue becomes more and more important in various countries. Especially multi-cultural nations like America and Australia have taken numerous affirmative actions to facilitate the minority HE. As a multi-national country, Chinese government also concerns about the disadvantaged minority groups

participation in HE as a significant policy focus during the past 60 years.

### 1. INTRODUCTIONS OF ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS IN CHINA

In China, there are 56 nationals. The dominate nationality is Han and other 55 non-Han nationalities legitimately recognized as ethnic minority groups. Ethnic minority groups are called "minority nationality" or "national minority" (shaoshu minzu) (Lee, 2001, p.21). Minority group constitutes 8.4% of the total population<sup>1</sup>.

Minorities group are unequally distributed in 30 different provinces of China. Some are spread in widely areas, while some are populated only in one province. The minority which exclusively subsists in one province is issued as autonomy province. For example, Xinjiang is an autonomy region of Uygur minority and Tibet is an autonomy province of Tibetan minority. Including five these autonomy provinces, there are approximately 120 autonomous minority areas (Kormondy, 1995). The object why government designated these autonomy ethnic areas is striving to give freedom and convenience to use their own languages and inherit their own culture.

Nevertheless, most of provinces they live are less-developing territories geographically and financially. Therefore, minority group are less developed than Han. Especially, the education level is low. The literacy level varies drastically among 55 minorities (Lamontagne, 1999). "Literature is a discriminating characteristic between the national minorities and the Han" (Ibid., p.145).

Languages are extremely diversified. According to statistics, minorities' languages in China are constituted more than 80 and extinct languages are countless. These

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s6200/201201/129611.html>

80 languages are belongs to 5 language categories: Sino-Tibetan Language Family, Altaic Language Family, Austral-Asiatic Language Family, Indo-Eroupean Language Family and Languages uncertain (Sites, 1999, p.97). However, Mandarin is addressed as the official language in China. Most of minority schools are undertaking bilingual education which leads to relatively low Han literacy level of minority students. In addition, English is a compulsory course in China which brings more pressure on minority students. Nevertheless, there are vast differences exist among minorities. What demonstrated above is only an overview of them.

## 2. HISTORY OF POSITIVE POLICIES FOR MINORITY EDUCATION IN CHINA

In early 1950, Chinese preferential policies for college applicants firstly started. MOE announced that soldiers with more than 3 years' experience, students from overseas and minorities could be allowed a lower score than standard in college admission exam (Wang, 2010)

In 1956, the preferences policy specifically for minorities first established. MOE issued *A Notice on Preferential College Admission for Minorities*. This document stated that "Considering the special conditions of minority students, more admission opportunities should be given to them. As long as their course grades can reach the lowest admission standard, preferential admission should be given to them" (Teng & Ma, 2009, p.84).

In late 1970, China suffered the Cultural Revolution. The National College Admission Examination was canceled. In 1978, The National College Entrance Examination restarted that more and more affirmative policies are promoted for ethnic students.

## 3. RECENT DEVELOPMENT OF PREFERENTIAL POLICIES QUOTAS

In 1978, preferential policies witness a vital step of development when admission quotas are issued in the new college entrance regulation. According to this document, each province implements their own quotas instruction which indeed promote the access rate of minorities. This policy is steadily practiced and advanced during 1980s and 1990s. There were only 2117 minority undergraduates in 1951 whilst it increased to 196,800 in 1996 (Lamontagne, 1999, p.180).

In 1984, the ministry of education and state ethnic affairs commission in "on strengthening the leadership and further to do good institutions of higher learning a few Minzu Ban opinion" (China, 1991, p.101) made specific provision towards national preparation school teaching and management issues, the provisions of the preparatory stage task is "according to the characteristics of minority

students, to take special measures, focusing on improving cultural foundation knowledge, strengthen the training of basic skills, so that students in moral, intellectual, physical aspects have been further development and the improvement in institutions of higher learning, for this, college for professional learning and lay the good foundation" (Anonymous, 1994). Preparation class is a system of classes teaching and learning professional knowledge in order to construct a good foundation for future study in colleges. Generally, the preparatory period of schooling is one year. A student whose Chinese language underpinning is low, learning time is two years.

## 4. PREFERENTIAL POLICIES AND EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

China's transaction from planned economy to market economy changes the socioeconomic circumstances leading to the different attitudes and perceptions of varied social groups towards preferential policies. Given this change, people are more and more sensitive among their individual rights and more and more intend to "pursuit justice of their own rights" (Teng & Ma, 2009, p.90). In recent years, it is argued that there are various demerits of preferential policies which result in inequity.

Firstly, it is asserted that the preferential policies consider the entire ethnic group equity beyond the individual equity (Teng & Ma, 2009). The preferential policies aim at narrowing the gap between Han group and minority group to achieve equity. However, at most time it has the reverse effect. For example, the Han students who live in minority area have similar low literature level yet can get beneficial from this policy. Moreover, there are also different levels of geographic, financial and education conditions within minority groups. This policy as for all could not equally consider individual benefits.

Unaffordable Tuition fees are another obstacle of equity for minority students besides academic readiness and requirement of high score in National College Entrance Examination (Teng & Ma, 2009). Although the quantity of minority students is expanded, the tuition fee does not tend to be decreased. According to MOE, 30% of students could not pay the higher education intuition fee and majority of them are came from minority group. The secondary school dropout rate is comparatively high in minority region. Their parents give up their hope of kids' education since they know that they are not able to afford the fee even their children could pass the access exam. Obviously, the financial input is inadequate although PRC government financial aid system has already developed loans and scholarships for them.

Therefore, we could say "the so-called education equality is only an ideal model. Absolute individual equality does not exist in reality" (Teng & Ma, 2009, p.93). Bruke (2012) points out that the key problem

of widen HE participation only concentrates on one dimension, such as social class. In China context, to expand the HE of minority group should not only consider their races. It is more equally and practical to look on multiple dimensions. For instance, sections in remote and underdeveloped regions may get more beneficial than normal areas. Government and universities should taking ethnic, regional and socioeconomic factors into consideration instead of considering races alone.

## 5. THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES

Having general review of minority policy, particularly minority HE policy, it is important to think what HE actually means to minority group. According to Lee (2001), minority higher education plays two vital roles: integration and modernization. However, it may contribute to two unplanned consequences: how to ensure ethnic identity in the case of integration and how to avoid attenuation of distinguishing features of minority groups in the case of modernization.

In the aspect of integration, Postiglione in Lee (2001, p.42) argued that the definitive goal to implement educational policy for minority nationalities is to achieve integration. As applied to China, the goal could be cooperation, acceptance, respects between Han and minority nations to achieve social cohesion. Conversely, HE may promote the self-consciousness of ethnic identity among the ethnic youth and doubt the Han governs.

Modernization is likely to narrow the differences between nationalities and Han (Lee, 2001). Today, minority students go to develop areas to learn and coming back to their minority area with a HE degree. They bring

back modernized ways in economy, agriculture and etc. Hence, It is important for minority students have clear understanding of identity of their individuals and as well as being a citizen of the China as a whole. That could be the ideological outcome of minority HE.

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